

Potential Regional Tourism Offer and Itinerary Development

All of the observed countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) currently base their tourist offer on:

- pristine nature suitable for different outdoor activities,
- cultural heritage,
- hospitality and tradition.

These main resources and potentials remain as the base for the development of the regional offer and itineraries. From the research of the information available on web and travel literature thus far completed, the shared offer could include:

Outdoor and nature based programs – all five countries have a variety of outdoor offer, three main outdoor/adventure activities (hiking, mountain biking and rafting) have been identified as those with most potential, with the addition of fishing as an outdoor activity with its own audience.

Additionally, the listed outdoor activities have been selected as those of adequate quality to attract visitors; they can be supplemented with other outdoor offer specific to the location, or cultural heritage or city tourism as parts of a particular itinerary.

Hiking: Hiking of different difficulty and focus is available throughout the region. It is possible to develop hiking itineraries covering territories of 2 neighbouring countries (e.g. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia), or itineraries that would span 2 or more countries (e.g. hiking tour from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Albania). With improved services and infrastructure, the hiking in the region is of extremely high quality.

Mountain biking and biking in general is again a potential throughout the region. Programs of a smaller scale are already available in Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Possibly in Albania too, just the information might not be as readily available. As the speed of movement and the profile of the customers that opt for this type of holidays, regional network of biking corridors would benefit all the countries involved.

Rafting: There are several rivers in the region offering world class rafting and white water activities. This can be very well combined with hiking, biking or other outdoor activities available locally, to facilitate adventure holidays. Additionally, quality of white water available in the region, allows for development of a specialised offer that would be targeting the sport market – competitions and training. Development of the sport aspect then becomes a specific marketing channel for the adventure market.

Fishing: Although not fitting directly with the adventure profile, the clear mountain rivers of the Balkan region provide for excellent fishing. This is a niche that might not be extremely large but reaches out to specialised and high spending audience.

History, religion and heritage – again, the historical heritage of the region is vast, reaching back to the antique times. This part of the world has played an important role in the main historic events and periods that shaped today's Europe, always adding its own twist to it. The Balkans become like a prism, a sieve through which the differences of the mixing worlds and civilisations went. It almost feels that, this small part of the world, became a "mixing bowl" that prepared different "salads" for the rest of the world, but also kept for eternity a unique conglomeration of the individual ingredients that came into it intertwined with the "new salads" that flourished in the world to the east and to the west of it.

And what is especially important as a tourism potential is the world out there is aware of the individual sites or events, but highly unaware of the complexity and the importance of the conglomeration found here. This familiarity in "flashes" and gaps in knowledge of the entirety is a major benefit to the region in presenting its own heritage, and can be worked to the large extent to the benefit of tourism development.

The interest that the travellers are showing in the region and their thirst for learning more about the history and the specific aroma, shows that this aspect of the region has not been sufficiently valorised in tourism. Unfortunately, information available on the region focuses on the recent times (last 20 years or so). The information available on the region as it was in the Greek and Roman times, on the Illyrian tribes that settled the peninsula from Slovenia to Albania, the medieval kingdoms that ruled those lands, or even some of the key events of the WW I, that information is not readily available. It however represents a huge potential to increase the attractiveness of the region, and open up new markets.

The exact combination of itineraries can be vastly different – from one country, to two or more countries, to the whole region. Itineraries can be based on periods - Roman for example, to religious heritage – Orthodox Monasteries, to themes – Illyrian World, which will very much depend on the status of the individual sites and their readiness to receive visitors.

In addition to these "topical" itineraries that can be developed and marketed, specific niche of the travel business opens up – and that would be research travel for students, academia and keen followers in the fields such as archaeology or other historic research fields. This specific interest group can become a major program for the region for a significant time period, as generally the historic events and sites are hugely under researched.

Tradition – the whole region boasts rich traditions very much present in the daily life, the life routines unchanged for decades and centuries in some cases. This would channel the development towards:

Rural tourism – development of accommodation and catering facilities within the existing rural settlements is an effort already present throughout the region. The system of small, family run accommodation facilities would also

complement the above mentioned outdoor offer, as well as the specific cultural heritage atmosphere.

Wine and food – the wine, the brandies and the cuisine that reflects the unique cultural milieu of the region area major contribution to the quality tourism experience. One needs to be aware that cuisine at this moment cannot compete with those of France or Italy – strong enough to mobilise the travel just for the sake of a particular wine or a dish. However, the way the food is grown and prepared, the role it has in the rituals and traditions of the people, the whole region has a large potential to position itself as Slow Food region. The Slow Food movement has over 85,000 members throughout the world; it promotes the idea of cultural cuisine – food closely linked with the traditions and culture of the people, in harmony with man and nature. Again, this would be complementary to the unique cultural heritage, and would also reflect the notions of importance of the incorporating the local cuisine and wine that exists in all the countries in the region.

Thus to summarise this initial overview – the following regional products have thus far been identified as having regional potential:

1. Outdoor programs, especially focused on:
 - a. Hiking
 - b. Mountain biking
 - c. Rafting
 - d. Sports
 - e. Fishing
2. Rural tourism
3. Slow Food – Cuisine, Wine, Brandies
4. Historic, cultural and religions heritage
 - a. Illyrian
 - b. Medieval
 - c. Ottoman
 - d. WWI
 - e. Archaeological
 - f. Orthodox Monasteries
 - g. World Religions Meet and Mix